

Lutheran Woman

September 2008

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On the Journey in Community

Orpah's Choice
Tale of Two Widows

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LIVING CONVERSATION

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 7 SEPTEMBER 2008

By the power of the Spirit, the Bible is a living conversation in which the texts talk to each other. How do we enter into the conversation? How will we find ourselves transformed?

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VOICES

Starting Out

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

I don't know about you,

but every year I find the first back-to-school advertisements to be kind of exciting. September is a month of new beginnings—new notebooks, new pencil cases, new teachers. For those of us shaped by the academic year, each autumn marks the start of a new journey. For me, it is more like New Year's Day than that day in January when people make resolutions. September feels like a fresh start, scary and hopeful, with the promise of adventure.

In this issue, we begin our new Bible study, "The Hidden Hand of God: Wisdom Stories from Ruth, Daniel, and Esther." The first session, "The Journey Begins," explores the themes of *hesed* (loving loyalty), heroic risk, and the hidden hand of God in the book of Ruth. Authors Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel write that Ruth "is the story of a young woman's courage to take incredibly heroic risks to secure a future for her mother-in-law and herself, and of God's hidden hand at work in human actions to bring blessing beyond what the human actors even dream possible."

When most of us think of the book of Ruth, we remember that beautiful declaration in which Ruth promises Naomi "where you go I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people and your God my God." We don't always remember that both Naomi and Ruth are grieving the loss of their husbands. In "A Tale of Two Widows," Martha E. Stortz tackles two aspects of widowhood: the distinction

between grief and suffering and the fact that one cannot return to one's old life. "Sometimes we are so busy looking for an old life that new life could be doing cartwheels in the living room and we wouldn't even notice. Our hearts need time to adjust. Grief gives us that time."

While Ruth decides to accompany Naomi back, Orpah makes a different decision. Martha Sterne writes in "Orpah's Choice" that "Orpah is not right and Ruth wrong. But neither is Ruth the only heroine in the story." She asks us to consider that "Orpah quietly makes an important and brave choice, too. She knows herself and she assesses reality and she realizes that her new life will be found in returning home."

Pondering Orpah's choice might be new to some of us. It is an example of how rich the study of Scripture can be. Lutheran women have a long history of doing Bible study together—it is part of our heritage. The rest of the church is catching up! The new ELCA "Book of Faith" initiative is a multi-year campaign to invite Lutherans to become fluent in Scripture.

In this issue, we have excerpted a section from *Opening the Book of Faith*, a new resource that's part of the initiative. This section is written by Mark Allen Powell, who begins: "We Lutherans believe that the Bible tells us what God wants to say to us." After this affirmation, he describes how Lutheran insights can open up the Bible. We invite you to join the conversation. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may write her at LWT@elca.org.



VE US THIS DAY

ascending prayers

Marj Leegard

How have we come to

this place? A combination of the death of our longtime doctor, the merging of hospitals, and an emergency room visit, plus the path of least resistance, determined where we would receive medical care.

Now we were facing a vast lobby with a ceiling that reached up to the top of the fifth floor. Wasted space, our thrifty farm upbringing declared. But the more time we spent in this place, the more the towering space brought us the feeling of being connected to eternity. There was nothing to block rising prayers. A plain canvas banner proclaimed in black script "Because of you."

We were there to prepare for Jerome's triple bypass surgery. He said, "It's all those cookies, you know. I've always liked cookies. Cookies before my 5 a.m. trip to the barn to milk the cows, cookie for breakfast, cookie for afternoon coffee, and then there was that last cookie before I went to bed every night." He shook his head.

As the maker of those cookies until these last years, I sought to comfort him. "Just think," I said, "You lived to be 89 years old on a comfortable regimen of cookies." Sugar cookies, oatmeal cookies, raisin cookies, molasses cookies. When Toll House cookies were first popular, we chopped great chunks of semi-sweet chocolate with a huge knife into small pieces. Finally someone invented chocolate chips. We made those cookies three times a year: Christmas, a birthday request, and when we served the Aid.

Jerome once found my hiding place for chocolate chips in the old bean jar.

He ate them all, and I had no chips left for cookies. He said I could use beans since I seemed to be confused about what belonged in the bean jar!

We waited a little less than patiently for Jerome's operation, but still we were in no hurry to begin the perilous process. And suddenly, after three long hours, the process was complete.

The first words he said as he was recovering consciousness, peering at me earnestly with one eye, was, "I have decided not to have this operation."

"It's already done," I told him. And successfully. He is doing remarkably well. We have had many helpers along the way. Our brother-in-law drove us back and forth and forth and back a half a hundred times.

Our son, daughter-in-law, and grandson were there for support. Our friends prayed, and we could feel the prayers ascending toward that high ceiling and we could feel the blessings returning.

I think of all the things that had to happen for this miracle: the people who had turned toward nursing as a career, the doctors who had studied for long hours. People at computers, and people constantly cleaning and preparing food. I want to go about thanking them, but I don't do well flitting about. So from my quiet corner, I write my thanks. Perhaps you are one of the thanked. Perhaps you, too, are a thank-er. Join in my prayer of gratitude and listen! Do you hear? It was because of you. 🌸

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



*Lucia Tapna lives in the village
of Nizpara in Bangladesh.*

ON THE JOURNEY

in community

by Teresita C. Valeriano

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Have you ever moved? Maybe more than once? I never used to think about moving. When I grew up in the Philippines, my address did not change for more than 20 years. But now I have been in the United States for 14 years, and I have moved at least five times—all for good reasons: college, internship, first congregational call, successive ministry calls. From place to place to place!

As I reflect on the story of Ruth and Naomi, I try to imagine their move from the country of Moab to Bethlehem. Describing that move as difficult is an understatement, especially for two women during those times, without the benefit of such modern resources as trucks and telephones.

They traveled on foot for many days on an uphill road to Bethlehem. But I think more challenging than the physical journey was the cultural understanding of relations between men and women at that time. These women had little identity without their husbands, no rights to property. Now we consider such treatment of women as oppressive and unjust, but that was the situation they found themselves in. What gave these destitute widows strength as they walked from Moab to Bethlehem? What sustained them?

The widows Ruth and Naomi were refugees. Like Ruth and Naomi, many people in our own time move from one land to another in hopes of finding a safer, better life. They move because they are driven by war, persecution, or extreme poverty. Recall that Elimelech, Naomi's husband, first left Bethlehem for Moab because of a famine.

LAND: REDEMPTION OR BONDAGE

In this Old Testament story of two women, land is an important factor. Ruth and Naomi cannot stay in Moab because there, they can own no land and so they have no livelihood. They go back to Bethlehem where there is a chance for survival because of Elimelech's land.

Land can represent either opportunity or oppression. It can bring power and wealth to some, or it might bury people deeper in poverty.

Take Lucia Tapna, for example. Lucia is a 45-year-old wife and mother of two who lives in the small village of Nizpara in Bangladesh.

Lucia and her husband have no formal education, but their children are in school. She and her husband own their house and two acres of land, but the produce of that land is not enough to keep the family fed and clothed. Both take seasonal jobs as laborers, but the pay is small. And because hunger and poverty make them more susceptible to illness, they often miss days at work—and that day's pay.

Despite their desire to survive on their own resources, they couldn't see a way out of the vicious cycle of poverty. Desperate to save themselves and their children, they went to the moneylenders (known as sharks in their village) and borrowed against part of their property. The 6,000 taka (or \$87) loan came with a very high interest rate. They couldn't get out from under the ever-compounding interest and repay their debt, and they were forced to borrow more money against their land. This land, once a source of hope for Lucia and her family, became a source of anguish.

Who would walk with them as they searched for a way to redeem their land?

A RECONCILING COMMUNITY

Lucia became a member of the Nizpara Nishi Female Group, part of the Tribal Empowerment Project of Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS), a non-governmental organization in Bangladesh. The RDRS is associated with the Lutheran World Federation's Department for World Service.

Soon Lucia learned about the group's land redemption program, which offered her a loan with a low interest rate. She used the group's program to pay their debt

to the moneylenders. This was the start of her family's journey to new life again.

The Department for World Service (DWS) is a humanitarian and development agency of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) that works with marginalized and disadvantaged communities in the areas of their greatest need.

Grounded in the mission of the church, DWS is committed to accompanying Lucia in rebuilding her family's life, offering freedom, integrity, stability, and hope. In many countries that have suffered conflict, natural disasters, and resulting poverty, people just want a quick fix. But the LWF, through DWS, seeks to accompany them as they rebuild, find a new home, or relocate in another country. They stay with them until they are settled, liberated, sustained, hopeful, and transformed. Because of the help Lucia and her family have received from the LWF, she is committed to transformation: of herself, others, and her community.

MINISTRY OF TRANSFORMATION

Lucia also attended community forums where she learned about more effective farming and community cooperation. Through the LWF-DWS accompaniment, she released herself from the bondage of poverty and oppression by paying back the moneylenders. She cultivated her family's land with crops that earned more than enough to pay back her loan to RDRS. But more than that, she also found solidarity and support with other women.

Through the efforts of Lucia and the women of Nizpara Nishi, residents of that village have resisted the manipulation of money sharks, developed strategies to improve life, educated themselves about their political rights, and showed the community how to live as equals. Lucia's path took a turn toward transformation that would not have been possible without advocacy that challenges the culture to formulate policies that promote justice and peace. Lucia and the women of Nizpara Nishi were not only given assistance—they

were empowered. Our mission is a journey together, as we accompany others to find lives of sustainability. Ruth and Naomi's journey was one story of accompaniment, a story of hope and redemption. If you meet Lucia today, she will tell you how her life is filled with hope and happiness. Her story is only one of many stories from her village. The DWS project, through advocacy, has also created a new awareness of and more positive attitude toward minority communities. All have been empowered.

Like the journey of Naomi and Ruth, Lucia's journey from poverty to new life is also our journey. We walk with Lucia through the ministry of the worldwide Lutheran communion. Lucia walks with us because of who she is: It is her gift to us. Lucia's journey continues in the land redeemed—not alone, but with us, as we celebrate God's faithfulness and grace together.

IN MISSION TOGETHER

In a fast-moving society like ours, it is sometimes hard to be attentive to the challenges and suffering of others who are forced to leave their homes by the harsh realities of the world we share.

There are many Ruths, Naomis, and Lucias in the Lutheran communion of churches. The journey together with others around the world is a gift we receive when we participate in LWF's mission. We do this through loving, reconciling relationships within our own communities and with the rest of the world. We do this through courageous acts—big and small—that affirm life. Through the gift of empowerment, our walking and acting together bear witness to the world. So, join the journey, sisters, and move! 🌸


The Rev. Teresita C. Valeriano is regional officer for the Lutheran World Federation in North America, based at the Lutheran Center in Chicago. Prior to coming to Chicago, she was Lutheran Campus pastor at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Before that, she was executive secretary for youth with the LWF Church and Society Desk in Geneva, Switzerland.

Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment (Department for Mission and Development) www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DMD/DMD-Publications.html

- Uphold the Rights of the Poor and Oppressed: Global Strategy 2007-2012 (Department for World Service) www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DWS/DWS-Stratplan.pdf

LWF Sunday will be observed on October 5 this year. Go to www.elca.org/lwf to find resources to help your congregation or women's group celebrate LWF Sunday.

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A photograph of a person with curly hair, seen from the back, wearing a light blue sweater. Their right arm is raised, with the index finger pointing upwards towards the top of the frame.

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CALENDAR NOTES

September

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including Evangelical
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book
of Worship (LBW), published by
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(www.augsburgfortress.org)

At sunset on September 1, our Muslim neighbors begin Ramadan, a month of fasting, prayer, and charity. The observance is the most solemn season on the Islamic calendar. At sunset on September 29, our Jewish neighbors observe Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the new year. This holy day begins 10 days of repentance leading up to Yom Kippur, the solemn day of atonement. For many Christian congregations, September is a time to begin a new year of education, ministry, and fellowship.

7 17th Sunday after Pentecost

This month's lectionary is all about how we can live in community: repenting of our sins, loving one another, living honorably, seeking reconciliation. Today Jesus tells us how we should deal with a member who's in error—not by driving her out, but by taking her aside privately. Where might that be a useful tactic in your own family, community, congregation, world? Today's texts are Ezekiel 33:7–11; Psalm 119:33–40; Romans 13:8–14; Matthew 18:15–20.

14 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Paul tells the Romans today to mind their own religious business: "Who are you to pass judgment on the servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall." How does this harmonize with the emphasis on forgiveness in today's first reading and the gospel passage? The readings appointed for today are Genesis 50:15–21; Psalm 103:8–13; Romans 14:1–12; Matthew 18:21–35.

14 Holy Cross Day

This feast can be traced back to the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, on this date in the year 335. The church was built on the site of the Crucifixion at the direction of Helena, mother of the emperor Constantine, who worked tirelessly to promote Christianity in the Empire. Today's texts are Numbers 21:4b–9; Psalm 98:1–4 or 78:1–2, 34–38; 1 Corinthians 1:18–24; John 3:13–17.

17 Hildegard of Bingen

Mystic, musician, artist, abbess—is there anything Hildegard could not do?

21 19th Sunday after Pentecost

I've always liked the story in today's first reading: Jonah's pouting at God for being merciful to those nasty Ninevites (just because they repented!). Jesus tells us more about God's infuriating generosity in today's gospel. The texts appointed for today are Jonah 3:10–4:11; Psalm 145:1–8; Philippians 1:21–30; Matthew 20:1–16.

22 Matthew, apostle and evangelist (transferred from Sunday)

We know so little about this saint: The story in today's gospel is about all we have, other than mentions of his name in lists. We don't even know whether he was martyred, let alone where. So how do we know when his feast day should fall? Some suggest that it was assigned to this date (perhaps as late as the fifth century) in hopes of draw

g new Christians away from
 their pagan neighbors' celebra-
 tion of the autumnal equinox. But
 Matthew's day never became the
 focus of fall festivals; the seasonal
 customs one might expect to find
 on this day gathered around the
 feast of the archangel Michael on
 September 29. The texts for Mat-
 thew's day are Ezekiel 2:8-3:11;
 Psalm 119:33-40; Ephesians
 4:4-10; Matthew 9:9-13.

20th Sunday after Pentecost

In today's gospel, Jesus gets the
 Pharisees in a box—about John's
 baptism, of all things. Can't you
 just hear their sulky answer, "We
 don't know"? But his point is
 clear: We can change our minds

and believe, no matter how late.
 Today's texts are Ezekiel 18:1-4,
 25-32; Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians
 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32.

29 Michael and all angels

Michael the archangel caught the
 imaginations of the ancients; artists
 love him, too. He is often depicted
 as an angel in armor defeating
 Satan or a dragon; sometimes he
 holds scales, reflecting the belief
 that he assists in the judgment of
 souls. Statues of the angel are often
 found in high places—the tips of
 steeples, mountaintops. There is a
 gilded statue of the angel atop the
 tall thin spire of Mont-St-Michel
 in France, 500 feet above sea
 level. The passages appointed for

today are Daniel 10:10-14, 12:1-3;
 Psalm 103:1-5, 20-22; Revelation
 12:7-12; Luke 10:17-20.

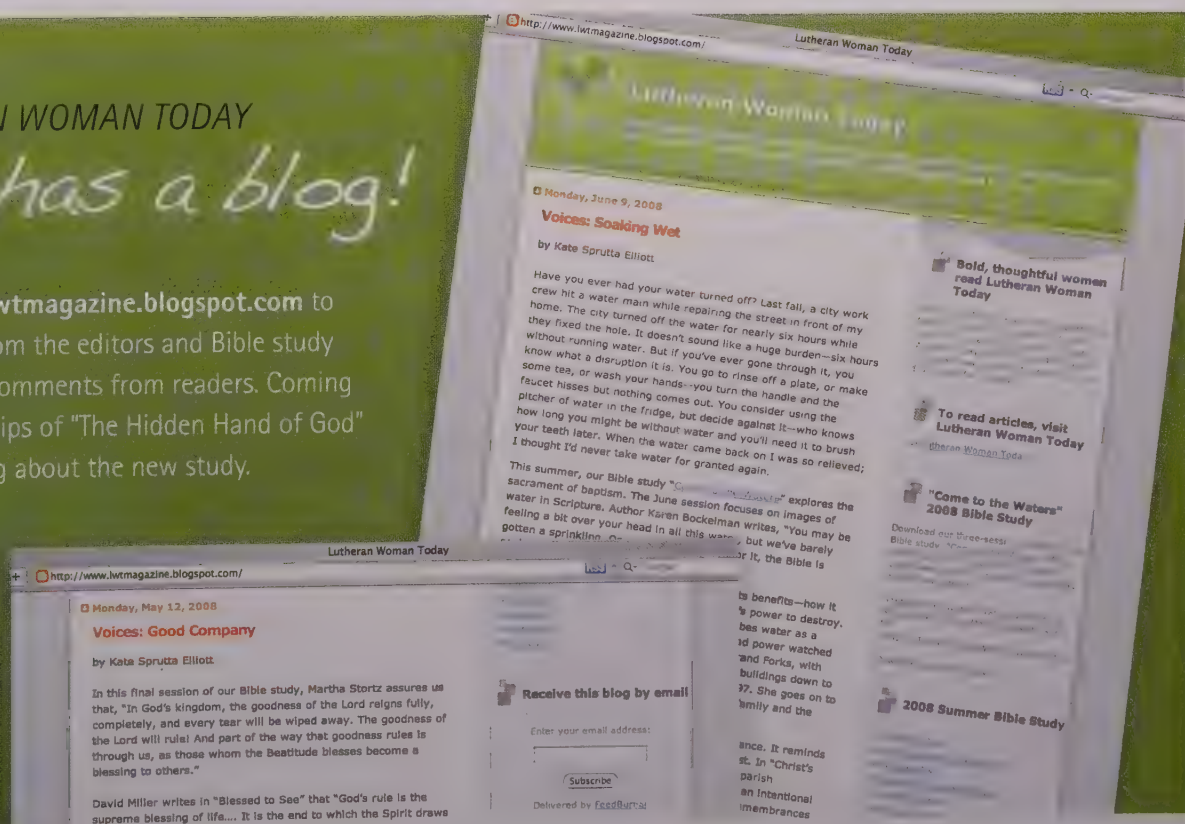
30 Jerome, teacher, translator

This scholar translated the Scrip-
 tures from Hebrew and Greek into
 the language of the people around
 him: Latin. And not classical, liter-
 ary Latin either; he used the Latin
 he heard in the streets and mar-
 kets around him—the Vulgate, the
 common language. Jerome's trans-
 lation was the standard edition of
 the Bible for Western Christians
 until Martin Luther translated the
 original Hebrew and Greek texts
 into German more than a thou-
 sand years later.

LUTHERAN WOMAN TODAY

has a blog!

Go to www.lwtmagazine.blogspot.com to
 read notes from the editors and Bible study
 writers, and comments from readers. Coming
 soon: video clips of "The Hidden Hand of God"
 writers talking about the new study.



Excerpted from *Opening the Book of Faith*

LUTHERANS REA



THE BIBLE

by Mark Allan Powell

First, although I am a Lutheran pastor and a Lutheran Bible professor, I cannot possibly speak for all Lutherans. I can't even speak for all ELCA Lutherans. At best, I can only try to describe what is *typical* and *traditional* for Lutherans. If your understanding of the Bible is different from what I offer here, that does not mean that you are a bad Christian—or even a bad Lutheran. One thing that Lutherans believe is that not everyone needs to be typical or traditional. We are bigger than that.

THE WORD OF GOD

Perhaps the first and last thing I want to say about Lutherans and the Bible is this: Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God. Of course, almost all Christians would say this—and they might mean all sorts of different things by it. So we have to ask: What does it mean to say the Bible is the Word of God? Simply put, it means that the Bible tells us what God wants to say. Things are going to get more complicated than that, but let us begin with that obvious affirmation: We Lutherans believe that the Bible tells us what God wants to say to us.

We read that our ELCA constitution says that we accept the Bible as “the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.” Thus, when people ask me what

Lutherans believe about the Bible, I try to use those words. I say, "We believe the Bible is the Word of God; we believe it is the inspired Word of God; we believe it is the authoritative Word of God."

But sometimes that is not enough, and people want to ask me other things. They ask me questions that I do not always know how to answer.

Someone says, "Do you believe the Bible?" I say, Yes, I do. "*Literally?*" they ask. "Do you believe it *literally?*"

I'm not sure how to answer that. I believe the literal parts literally. And I believe the metaphorical parts metaphorically. When the Bible says, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1), I believe that, but I don't think that I believe it *literally*. If the Lord were literally my shepherd then wouldn't I have to be a literal sheep? And I'm not.

The Bible says that God is a rock (Psalm 18:31). I believe that. But I don't believe it literally.

And then someone will ask, "What about errors? What about contradictions? Do you believe the Bible is *inerrant?*"

Again, I'm not sure how to answer, because I'm not always sure what *they* mean by errors. Scientific errors? Jesus said the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds (Mark 4:31). Scientists tell me that orchid seeds are smaller. Is that a horticultural error? Or maybe Jesus was

just talking to people who would never see an orchid, so the mustard plant had the smallest seeds as far as they were concerned. How far do we want to press this question of "errors"?

How about grammar? There's one place in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus warns his disciples to beware of wolves in sheep's clothing. He says, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). How, exactly, do you recognize a wolf by its fruit? Wolves don't have fruit. My seventh-grade grammar teacher would have called that a "mixed metaphor." If Jesus had written it in her class, she would have marked it with red ink—called it a grammatical error and made him do it over.

But these things don't bother me—and they don't bother most Lutherans. There are churches for which these things are very important, and people write big books explaining why things that look like errors in the Bible aren't really errors and why things that look like contradictions aren't really contradictions. The point is to defend the Bible as accurate and reliable and true. Not many of these books are written by Lutherans because that is not usually what interests us. The difference lies in what we mean when we say "the Bible is the Word of God." We do not mean, "the Bible is a book that contains no

errors or contradictions." We mean, "the Bible is the book that tells us what God wants to say to us." That puts a different spin on things.

For the most part, Lutherans are more interested in understanding the Bible than they are in defending it. We don't think that we have to prove the Bible is the Word of God—we just believe that it is the Word of God, and then we focus on asking, "What does God have to say to us?"

Again, I cannot speak for all Lutherans, but I will tell you what I think. I think that the Bible says exactly what God wants it to say. Every book of the Bible, every chapter of the Bible, every verse of the Bible says exactly what God wants it to say. So, if there are contradictions or errors or whatever you want to call them in the Bible, it's because God wants them to be there or allows them to be there. Either way, when we read the Bible, it tells us what God wants to say to us. And that is what I care about hearing the Word of God.

But let us move on. Lutherans have more to say about the Word of God—and it is really good stuff.

Lutherans typically speak of "the Word of God" in a threefold sense. The Word of God is, first, Jesus Christ (the Incarnate Word); second, the message of law and gospel (the proclaimed Word); and, third, the Bible (the written Word).

his, again, is in the constitution of the ELCA.

It isn't just Lutherans who speak of "the Word of God" this way. The Bible itself does so.

First, the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as the Word of God. In John's Gospel, we read, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (John 1:1). And, then, a little bit later, John's Gospel says, "The Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Obviously, the Bible did not become flesh and live among us. Jesus Christ did. So Jesus Christ is the Word of God.

Second, the Bible speaks of preaching as the word of God. In the book of Acts, we often hear about Peter or Paul or some other missionary preaching "the word of God" (see, for example, Acts 13:5; 18:11). What did they do?

They didn't just read the Bible to people: they proclaimed a message that convicted people of their sin and offered them hope of salvation. Lutherans call this "the message of law and gospel." Thus, the message of law and gospel may also be identified as "the word of God."

And, third, the Bible identifies the Scriptures as the word of God. For example, when Jesus believes that some people are failing to abide by one of the Ten Commandments, he tells them that they are "making void the word of God" (Mark 7:13).

Jesus did not just regard Scripture as ancient testimony, as a collection of old traditions that ought to be valued for their historical significance. He believed that the writings of Scripture continued to express what God had to say to people centuries after they were written. Thus, the writings of Scripture may be identified as the word of God.

Not many people will argue with this idea of the threefold word of God, but some might wonder why it matters. Are we simply using the same phrase for three different things? No, we would say that they are not three different things but three different representations of the same thing.

When the Christian missionaries preached the message of law and gospel, they revealed the same truth that Jesus Christ revealed when he became flesh and lived among us. Likewise, when we say that the Bible is the "Word of God" we mean that it also reveals this same truth. The Bible functions as the Word of God when it shows us Jesus Christ and conveys the message of law and gospel to us. 🌿

Mark Allen Powell teaches New Testament at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

Excerpted from Opening the Book of Faith by Diane Jacobson, Mark Powell, and Stanley Olson, copyright © 2008 Augsburg Fortress. Used by permission.



The Book of Faith is an ELCA initiative that invites the whole church to become more fluent in the first language of faith, the language of Scripture, in order that we might live into our calling as a people renewed, enlivened, empowered, and sent by the Word.

Encourage your congregation to make a commitment to expand its study of the Bible. To register a commitment and to learn more about the Book of Faith initiative, go to www.elca.org/bookoffaith.

As part of your congregation's commitment, encourage the use of *Opening the Book of Faith*, along with its *Leader Guide and Assessment Tools*. To order, go to www.augsburgfortress.org/bookoffaith.

Look for an introductory Bible course in fall 2008, a new *Adult Bible Study* in spring 2009, and the release of the *Lutheran Study Bible* also in spring 2009. For the latest information about new resources and e-updates go to www.augsburgfortress.org/bookoffaith.



HEALTH WISE

Ouch! Coping with Chronic Pain

by Molly M. Ginty

It fries your nerves. It fogs your brain. It fouls your mood.

That's the toll of chronic pain, defined as any ache that lasts more than three months, impairs your normal functioning, and is no longer useful because it alerts you to an injury you already know about.

"Common yet undertreated, persistent pain limits you in many ways, affecting you psychologically as well as physically," says Dr. Jennifer Schneider, author of *Living with Chronic Pain*. "It can take over your entire life—but only if you let it."

According to the American Pain Foundation, 14 percent of us have aches that have persisted three to 12 months, while 42 percent suffer from pain that has lasted more than a year. These stats—and the fact that chronic pain is the leading reason we seek medical care—have prompted health advocates to name September Pain Awareness Month.

From stiff shoulders to aching arches, chronic pain can strike anywhere, often plaguing several body parts at once. Its most common forms are backaches (27 percent), followed by headaches (15 percent), neck pain (15 percent), and facial aches (4 percent).

Who develops chronic pain? Researchers believe sufferers may have lower-than-average levels of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers. Studies show they may also have memories of pain stuck in the brain's cortex long after injuries have healed.

Being female is another risk factor. According to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, women are more likely than men to have pain. And according to a University of Maryland study, they're also more likely to seek treatment for it.

"Women transmit sensations in their central nervous systems differently than men do, so they seem to have a heightened perception of pain," says Micke Brown, R.N., director of advocacy for the American Pain Foundation. "They're more likely to develop painful problems such as fibromyalgia and migraines, and they experience pain due to pelvic conditions that men don't get, such as endometriosis and fibroids."

Regardless of how chronic pain begins and develops, the search for a cure can prove maddening. "No medical tool can measure pain's intensity, so the standard way of assessing it is for a doctor to ask, 'On scale of 1 to 10, how much pain are you having?'" says Schneider. "Since the reply is subjective, it can be tough to tell what's going on and fix it."

Because chronic pain is so difficult to assess and treat, sufferers see an average of five to eight doctors—and search three to five years—before finding a cure that works. The good news? Faster relief is possible if you follow these expert tips.

GET TREATMENT ASAP

"The longer you leave pain unattended, the more damage it does to the central nervous system, and the worse the problem becomes," warns Brown. "Act now, and you'll spare yourself more pain down the line."

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.



COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

When you seek treatment, give your doctor a detailed, written description of your experience. “Chronic pain patients are often so distraught that they don’t describe their symptoms in a clear, chronological way,” says Judith A. Paice, president of the American Pain Society. “But if you communicate effectively, you’ll get effective help.”

BLEND REMEDIES

The first line of defense against chronic pain is usually medication: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, anti-seizure drugs, opioids, or tricyclic antidepressants. Other remedies include meditation; biofeedback; acupuncture; hypnosis; chiropractic; counseling; music, water, and physical therapies; yoga; and transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS), which delivers gentle impulses to the affected area. If one cure fails you, experts recommend trying another—then another—until you find the right mix.

RETHINK YOUR RITUALS

Whether you realize it or not, your regular habits could be causing—or exacerbating—your pain. Reexamine what you do on a daily basis. What movements trigger flare-ups? What events cause stress that makes the pain worse? Is your mattress the right type to help your lower back problem? Is your work station set up to ease your neck, arm, or wrist pain? Make sure that you move and act only in ways that support your healing.

EXERCISE, GENTLY

“People in chronic pain are often afraid of physical activity, but if you don’t move, your muscles get stiff and weak, making the problem worse,” says Schneider. Every day, get a little exercise, slowly walking around the block or simply stretching on the floor.

GET SUPPORT

Tell your friends and family what you’re going through and keep your employer in the loop. Consider reaching out to on-line peer support groups run by the American Pain Foundation (www.painfoundation.org) and the American Chronic Pain Association (www.theacpa.org).

THINK POSITIVE

“Give yourself permission to cry and get angry, but don’t get stuck in ‘woe is me,’” says Maggie Buckley of Walnut Creek, California, who has lived for three decades with daily pain from Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a connective tissue disorder. “Even if the pain doesn’t go away, you can cope if you stay positive and focus on what you *can* do. This will distract you from the pain, and that will allow you to resume enjoying your life.”

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women’s eNews*.

A white ceramic cup filled with dark coffee sits on a matching saucer. The cup is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame. In the background, a green cloth is draped over a surface, and a red flower is visible in the upper-right corner. The overall lighting is soft and warm.

Tale

OF TWO WIDOWS

What did we do to deserve this?" This is the question my neighbor has been asking over and over—and not just this morning. Like all the other times, I have no real answers. We can't ask her children, because they would scare them. And she won't ask her pastor, because she doesn't see him anymore. Church is what we used to do on Sunday mornings. Now it's the farmers' market and *The New York Times*. She's sick of people telling her that God will bring something good out of all this. I know what she means.

"Where is God in all of this?" We both lost our husbands to the same rare form of brain cancer. For a year we shared doctors and treatments, news of clinical trials and alternative therapies. We even shared dinner at the local neighborhood restaurant, booking the same booth so that whoever had the more recent surgery could hide his scars from the rest of the diners.

Now we share coffee, questions, and this gallows sense of humor. Her husband, diagnosed earlier, lasted longer. He declined gradually like a leaf falling in a gentle breeze. Mine, diagnosed later, fought to maintain an active life, then just toppled off a cliff. One month we were hiking in Kauai; the next, he was dead.

"If God is all-powerful, why would God let cancer happen?" Mentally I add to the list: Or Dar-

fur? Iraq? The murder rate in West Oakland? We are sitting on her deck on a crisp Saturday morning, wrapped in blankets, warmed by the autumn sun even as our coffee makes steam. Above us all the clouds look like brain scans, but I keep this insight to myself. This kind of sky used to scare me, until I imagined that maybe we were all living deep in the mind of God. Maybe, just maybe, I muse, God wanted so much to share our lot that God took on brain cancer. Maybe, just maybe, this is how God is all-powerful. God is powerful enough to be stricken.

"I mean, what did we do to deserve this?" Ah—we have come full circle, back to the original question. I admit my mind wanders during these recitations, partly because I know the script so well, partly because I still have no answers. I can only give her companionship, like the companionship that Ruth gave Naomi. If she could receive them, I'd give her two things in addition: a rough distinction and a hard truth.

The rough distinction

Suffering and grief

Put simply, suffering is what happens to you; grief is what you do about it. It's an important difference, one better illustrated than explained. Occasionally two of my students sport black T-shirts that

declare on the front in bold white lettering: "Manure occurreth." Bad stuff happens all the time, and the two students have had their share. That's suffering. But in spite of it all, these two live life boldly, and wearing T-shirts with attitude testifies to that. That's grief.

*When she looks up again
and unclenches her hands
from around that coffee mug,
these are the two things I'll put
in them: a sense of surviving
and the promise of new life.*

You can hear the distinction between suffering and grief in everyday speech. It's the difference between "I" and "me." A woman who's suffered a stroke tells you: "A stroke paralyzed me on my right side . . ." Pause the video camera: That's suffering. There she is in the objective pronoun, the object of a verb's action, the victim of a devastating short-circuit in the brain. But roll the camera: ". . . so I use a cane. On bad days, I use a walker that my grandkids painted all the colors of the rainbow." That's grief. There she is in the nominative pronoun, the subject of a verb's action, the stroke survivor. These two illustrations describe the difference between suffering and grief, a difference between being a victim and a survivor, the difference between

being a subject of one's actions or the victim of circumstance—and reclaiming what agency you can.

My neighbor on the deck that chilly morning simply isn't there yet. Someone who's been hit by a truckload of suffering doesn't just get up, dust herself off, and walk away from the scene of the accident. Suffering takes its toll, and suffering takes its time.

What moves someone from suffering to grief? This question does have an answer, and Ruth knows it. Nothing more and nothing less than companionship. When my husband died, I felt like an amputee. It was as if my right arm had suddenly been torn from my body, yet I still had the sensation of searing pain at the end of fingertips that were no longer there. People carried things to me: meals and casseroles and flowers. People carried things for me: groceries and books and all the beautiful clothes that my husband had bought so thoughtfully and worn so well. In time, I learned how to carry things by myself. But it took time—and the infinite patience of my friends.

Naomi suffers the loss of her husband. For a while, she is paralyzed. But in time, she learns to walk again. And when Naomi starts grieving—watch out! She changes her name; she decides to go back to her homeland; she releases her daughters-in-law. We may not like her new name; we may think there's

nothing for her back in Bethlehem; we may find her overbearing and bossy. But Naomi has taken charge. Grieving reclaims agency.

The hard truth

An old life and a new one

My neighbor calls to me as I head out for a walk: "If you see my Old Life out there, could you please remind it where I live?" We both laugh, but I know that our Old Lives are not coming back. It takes a while for this hard truth to sink in. Naomi doesn't leave Moab right after Elimelech's death. Maybe she too is looking for traces of her Old Life.

In the same way, Easter morning finds Mary Magdalene back at Good Friday's tomb. Mary is looking so hard for the old Jesus that she fails to see the risen Christ in front of her.

The hard truth is that after his resurrection Jesus gets mistaken for all kinds of strange people: a gardener (John 20:15), a ghost (Luke 24:37), a wandering rabbi on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35), another fisherman who stands on the shore like some backseat driver and tells everyone else how to fish (John 21:1–8), a short-order cook who shows up to prepare the first breakfast for a group of weary fisherman (John 21:9–14).

All of Jesus' friends were looking so hard for the old Jesus, they failed to notice the risen Christ. It's as if they had all walked out of a

dark movie theater into the bright afternoon sun: Their eyes needed time to adjust. The good news is they have time. Jesus doesn't ascend to his Father right after Easter. He sticks around, giving the disciples 40 days between Easter and Ascension to get used to the new life in their midst. Their hearts needed time to adjust.

So do ours. Sometimes we are so busy looking for an old life that new life could be doing cartwheels in the living room and we wouldn't even notice. Our hearts need time to adjust. Grief gives us that time. Just as the risen Christ searched out the disciples wherever they were—at tombs, in their boats, even behind locked doors!—so grace finds us in the midst of our grieving. All we have to do is look up, unlock the doors, and open our hands.

"What did we do to deserve this?" The question keeps coming. When she looks up again and unclenches her hands from around that coffee mug, these are the two things I'll put in them: a sense of surviving and the promise of new life. In the meantime, I can only give her what Ruth gave Naomi. Sturdy companionship. 🌿

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LET US PRAY

Saying Yes

by Debra K. Farrington

Imagine this: You walk into a travel agency and ask the agent to book you on a trip to the destination of her choice. You'll go anywhere and stay there as long as she decides. What's more, you give her your credit card to charge the trip, no matter the cost. I don't know about you, but not only do I want to pick the destination, but decide when I'll go, what I'll do, and how much I'll pay.

Perhaps that's why the line Ruth speaks to her mother-in-law takes my breath away: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16b). Now that's courage—the kind of courage God asks of each of us.

I really do mean *asks*, rather than demands. In my own experience, God invites each of us to find the courage to say yes to what is asked of us, but God does not walk away in a snit if we say no. God does, however, continue to extend the invitation to us time and time again. God is nothing if not persistent.

In a workshop on discernment, a young woman said she wasn't sure she wanted to practice discernment because she didn't want to give God the reins. She wanted to choose her own path in life, and she was wise enough to know that—at least for the time being—she wasn't willing to move outside her comfort zone. That's true for most of us at various points in our lives.

And yet, some of the most rewarding moments I've known have come when

I've found the courage to step outside that comfort zone. When I was first asked to write a book, I laughed at the idea. When I was asked to head a publishing house, I said no for three months. Both of those invitations seemed far-fetched to me. Both seemed like invitations to work in areas where I had little to offer. But God kept working on me, and I finally said yes to both offers. Looking back, I can't imagine how much poorer my life would have been if I said no.

Perhaps you, too, are being invited to travel to new places, to try something a little different in your life. Or maybe that invitation is right around the corner. Either way, or even if you're just looking for the courage to listen for God and go where you're called, spend some time with this prayer of St. Augustine of Hippo. Then keep your ears and heart open, and perhaps God will surprise you.

Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you have made us for yourself, so that our hearts are restless till they rest in you; grant us purity of heart and strength of purpose, that no passion may hinder us from knowing your will, no weakness from doing it; but in your light may we see clearly, and in your service find perfect freedom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. 🌿

Debra K. Farrington is a retreat leader and has written eight books of Christian spirituality, including *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life* (Jossey Bass, 2003). Learn more at her Web site, www.debrafarrington.com.



Orpah's CHOICE

by Martha Sterne

I believe I have known many Orpahs and will meet others. You know Orpah, too.

The first Orpah I recognized was a woman I met in 1997 when I was trying to become the rector of a beautiful little Episcopal church in Maryville, Tennessee, a town nestled on the edge of the Great Smoky Mountains. She was the person on the search committee who was assigned to check me out to see if a group interview would be worth pursuing. I don't remember much of what she said in our initial conversation on the phone, probably because I was babbling and trying very hard to be charming, dignified, holy, available, like that. I do not think I fooled her, but it was the beginning of what turned into a real friendship.

It took me a while to hear Orpah's story. I often found myself talking to her about me, while she listened quietly, attentively. This is the thing with Orpahs. They do not grab center stage. Orpahs are not drama queens, and often it seems that other people's dramas

are invited to unfold before them perhaps because Orpahs are generous, non-anxious companions.

Supporting roles

Think about the Orpah in the Bible. She plays a supporting role in Ruth and Naomi's story. Ruth and Naomi are the lead characters. Orpah loves them both and there is a moment when she weeps as she pictures herself not journeying on with them to Naomi's homeland. But when Naomi begs the two younger women to look at the big, bleak picture of what a move would mean for their futures, Orpah listens. She listens with compassion for herself and for the others, which is what God hopes will happen whenever we have words pass among and between human beings.

What if we listened like that when others, even those closest to us, make their passionate choices? What if we took all that we hear from others and all that we gather from our inner world and then decided what is best for us in a self-discerning way?

That is the kind of person Orpah is. Orpah quietly makes an important and brave choice, too. She knows herself and she assesses reality and she realizes that her new life will be found in returning home. No immortal speeches, just tears and hugs and a turning back to the world she knows and the familiar responsibilities and relationships that await her there. New days and old ways will intertwine. She does not have to travel on geographically to live into God's future. Sometimes, as T. S. Eliot says, "the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." That finding her way back to where she started is Orpah's gentle pilgrimage.

Staying put

Back to my Maryville Orpah. The first thing I noticed was that she worked like a pleasant demon. Before my time as rector, the parish secretary had died, and Orpah just came into the office and did what had to get done without fanfare.

She continued to work behind the scenes all the years I was there, never taking credit, just listening to the rhythms of the parish and then working things out. Orpahs do that—they do the work without an appreciative audience. This is totally foreign to my nature but I admire it.

I also noticed through the years that she rarely said anything in

*“the end of all our
exploring will be to
arrive where we started
and know the place for
the first time.”*

T. S. Eliot

meetings, though she almost always cheerfully volunteered to take minutes. Is that a wonderful quality or what? Sometimes even in small gatherings you did not realize that she was there, listening alertly and respectfully and keeping a record.

Gradually, I learned that her daddy had moved his family around while he rose through the ranks of middle-America small-town newspapers. Eventually he became the

publisher of the Maryville *Daily Times*. He was retired when I came to town but I ran into him enough to see that he was a smart, colorful, excitable man—and that when he walked into the room people jumped up and did things and said things that they thought he would like. He took up a lot of psychic space in any gathering. You know the kind of man—a community mover and shaker. Fortunately for Maryville, he and his paper moved and shook the town toward progressive endeavors.

In the early '90s, he sold the paper for gazillions of dollars. He put his money where his mouth was—giving big money to things he cared about, as well as passing significant money along to his children. But that is getting ahead of Orpah's story.

She always adored him and her mother. She told me that her sister, whom we shall call Ruth, was the cute, popular one while Orpah was the studious one, and her parents sent her off to get a good education. Ruth married and lived in Maryville only a little bit of each year.

Ruth had a pleasant relationship with her parents but never seemed to be there when they broke their hips or needed chemo. Perhaps, I don't know, but perhaps like the biblical Ruth, she was more connected to her in-laws.

That's the thing. The sisters made different choices. One moved on. One stayed behind. Maybe Ruth is somewhere in Bethlehem earning the Nobel Prize (I don't think so but maybe). But maybe Orpah's staying put and tending to home fires deserves the Nobel Prize as well.

Showing up

Orpah went into the newspaper business, working for her father. She married and had three girls and eventually was the editor of the Maryville paper under her publisher dad. This was what you might call multi-tasking carried to the tenth power.

The marriage did not survive. She says the girls raised themselves, but I don't believe it. There is a love among them that didn't just come out of nowhere. My guess is that Orpah worked like a dog all day running the newspaper and trying to please her excitable father (who I am sure had an opinion about most every single word of most every single article in the paper). And then she went home and hugged her girls or at least sat with them full of love in the dark while they slept in their rooms.

So. Orpah showed up at the Maryville city council meetings and the county commission meetings (which are long and character-building, believe me). And she showed up at many of the other

often tedious meetings that make a community run because she was the editor of the newspaper and because that is what her father did before her.

Unlike her father, she did not change the atmosphere in the room when she entered. People didn't say, "Ooooh, there's Orpah. Let me think of something brilliant to say." Instead they smiled and said, "Oh, good, hey Orpah."

She did the best she could with her girls, mainly respecting them and the Holy Spirit enough to step back and let them grow into the creative, useful women God intended them to be. She encouraged other young people, including staff members at the paper. She loved and still loves animals and has many friends of all sorts and conditions.

Orpah never has seemed to notice who is important; she just courteously listens to everybody. She has hiked many of the trails in the Smokies with a variety of companions—including countless climbs with a woman in her 80s. After a divorce hiatus, she got back re-involved with the church.

Being there

I can see Orpah's face in prayer to this very moment. Eyes closed. Generous mouth in repose. She's gone somewhere deep in her spirit. I have seen this face before—the face of faith in a Renaissance rendering

of the Madonna or in a fourth-century Buddha.

When the paper was sold, Orpah retired at a young middle-aged age. She travels to exotic places like Antarctica and India and the Galapagos Islands, but she always comes home and gets back in the traces. She watched over her mother as she faded and died. She watches over her father who still has that very strong personality and will. (He's fabulous, but he would drive me crazy.) He remarried, and he and his sweet new wife want Orpah to drive them to their place way down in Florida a couple of times a year. She does it, though she says it is getting to be too strenuous for them (and surely for her). With her eyebrows slightly raised, she murmurs, "It is quite a trip."

She remains an active, generous community volunteer still doing what needs to be done and giving what needs to be given. She is back as the senior warden of the church during an interim between-rector time. And she loves her grandchildren and babysits with pleasure. She keeps her mouth firmly closed unless asked a parenting opinion.

Orpah is not a saint. She has her faults. Who doesn't? But she is there. For her father, for her town, for her kids, for her grandchildren, for her friends, for her church. Nobody ever stands around and waxes eloquent about how brave

and daring Orpah's love for others is. She would be horrified if somebody did. But when Ruth moved on to more exotic adventures, Orpah stayed in place, in season and out, which to some of us seems brave and daring as well.

Orpahs are an endangered species. While people blog and video every step of their journeys, Orpah quietly takes her notes and passes on only life-giving information. Her choices are not huge dramas; they are what seems right to her by the light of her faith and experience.

I must say ruefully I wish there were an Orpah in my family. In a time when many of us have moved away from our families and aging parents, Orpah stayed home to love and serve and bloom where she was originally planted. She is a hero to me, and she would be a godsend to my mother living alone whose children are hundreds of miles away.

Orpah is not right and Ruth wrong. But neither is Ruth the only heroine in the story. I want to say "Bravo for Orpah! Bravo for all the Orpahs!" If you are an Orpah, please thank God for yourself today. And if you know an Orpah (and you do) please thank her and God for the gifts she brings to the universe. 🌿

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THE HIDDEN HAND OF GOD: WISDOM STORIES FROM RUTH, DANIEL, AND ESTHER
SESSION 1

Ruth: The Journey Begins

by Gwen Saylor and Ann Fritschel

BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

Ruth 1:16b–17

“Where you go I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people will be my people and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried.
May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Opening Prayer

Hymn “Bless Now, O God, the Journey”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 326)

Prayer

Gracious God,
you invite us
to be part of the journey
of your people traveling together
on our way.
As we enter the journeys of Naomi and Ruth,
we pray that your Spirit
will enliven our own journeys
as your loved and loving daughters and sons.
Grant us grace
to sense in our own lives
your loving loyalty toward us
even as you equip us
to live in loving loyalty with one another.
In the name of the One
who journeys with us
every step of the way.
Amen.

Ruth: The Journey Begins

Greetings and welcome to our nine-month study of the wisdom stories of Ruth, Daniel 1–6, and Esther. In similar yet unique ways, the stories recounted in these books help us reflect on our call to discipleship in the complex world in which we live. Three “H” themes will guide our study.

Hesed is a Hebrew word defined as “loving loyalty, faithfulness, loving kindness.” It means loving loyalty that goes beyond the expected to unanticipated depths. *Hesed* is central to all three of the books we will study; exploring how it works in these books will equip us to examine how God may be calling us to express *hesed* in our lives today.

Heroic actions are, as might be expected, actions for the sake of others that involve great risk to the one performing them. Witnessing what the leading characters do and why they do it will challenge us to ponder the risks that God may be calling us to take as part of our faithful discipleship.

Hidden refers to the presence of God in all three books. Seeing how the hidden hand of God is at work in all three stories will give us opportunities to reflect on how God sometimes seems hidden in our lives or in the lives of those we love and how we are called to live in those times.

Each month, the theme Bible verse will illustrate the “H” themes central to the session. We will spend three sessions on each of the books, considering first the book of Ruth, then Daniel 1–6, and finally the book of Esther. It is our prayer that in our study together all of us will grow in our confidence in God’s never-ending love for us and in courage to take the risks that God may be calling us to take in the complex situations in which we live.

Overview of the Book of Ruth

Often the story of Ruth is portrayed as a simple romance, a quaint love story involving a beauti-

ful young woman and a prominent handsome man whose marriage results in the birth of the son who will become ancestor to David and, eventually, to Jesus. In our three sessions on the book of Ruth, we will see that this marvelously written story is much more. It is a story of a daughter-in-law’s loving loyalty (*hesed*) to her mother-in-law as together they struggle to survive in incredibly tumultuous times. It is the story of a young woman’s courage to take incredibly heroic risks to secure a future for her mother-in-law and herself, and of God’s hidden hand at work in human actions to bring blessing beyond what the human actors even dream possible. It is a story that challenges us to reflect deeply on how God may be calling us to exercise loving loyalty in the world in which we live.

In this first session, we invite you to read Ruth 1 closely, focusing on how the names of the characters and of significant places set the tone for the story that follows in chapters 2 through 4. As our reading of the chapter proceeds, we will introduce two biblical laws whose fulfillment or non-fulfillment will be central to the story, and will weave in the three “H” themes (*hesed*, heroism, hiddenness) that will guide the entire year’s study. As we work through the chapter together, we invite you to choose the character with whom you identify most closely and reflect on what in your life has led you to this identification.

Before We Start

Supplemental Background Information

The language in which Ruth originally was written is Hebrew. Like all English translations, the NRSV attempts to render the ancient language into smooth English form. As a result, the translated text we have sometimes misses nuances and word-plays that would have been obvious to the ancient Hebrew audience. Hebrew is a playful, open-ended language. Delighting in ambiguity and double meanings, ancient writers creatively used the language to express in vivid, memo-

rable ways the complexity of human life within the covenant relationships to which God invited Israel and all creation. Throughout this study, we will highlight nuances and word-plays that are obvious in the Hebrew text (or in the case of Daniel 2–6, the Aramaic text) but obscured in our English translation.

The collection of biblical books referred to as the Old Testament in many English translations is also known by other names, including First Testament and Hebrew Bible. For a variety of reasons, but particularly to emphasize that our English text is a smoothed-out translation from the Hebrew, we will refer to the collection as the Hebrew Bible.

Before we begin, it is helpful to point out the difference between the setting of the biblical stories we will study and the actual time periods in which they may have been written down. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the ancient writers frequently addressed issues of their own time by setting a story in an earlier time period. Setting the story in the past allowed them to address hot-button issues of their own time without the flaring of emotions likely if the issue were confronted more directly. As will become apparent, this is the case with each of the three books we will study.

Does this mean that these biblical stories are simply made-up “stories” rather than the true Word of God? No, it does not. It means that God’s ways of communicating truth are much deeper and broader than we sometimes think. As inheritors of the western scientific worldview, we often tend to equate “true” with “historically factual.” This extremely narrow definition of truth reduces the Bible to the level of historical documentary. But the Bible is much more. God’s living word spoken in and through biblical stories does not depend on historical accuracy for its truth claims. The living truth of who God is and who God calls us to be as God’s loved and loving people are proclaimed through story as well as through the many other kinds of biblical writings, such as letters, poetry, and prophecy.

As Lutherans, we believe in the truth of Jesus Christ revealed in and through the biblical word. That truth lies in the proclamation of God’s love for all creation and particularly for humanity, in God’s call to us to live in covenant community. Where hearts are convicted (law) and forgiveness and new life proclaimed (gospel), there truth is present. The Holy Spirit works through story as well as through history to communicate the good news. The truth of the book of Ruth relies on proclamation, not the historical verifiability of the story’s details.

Guided by the Spirit’s presence and power in our study together, we will encounter deep truths in Ruth, Daniel 1–6, and Esther, and in encountering them we will continue to grow in our identity as God’s loved and loving people.

Throughout the study, you will discover references to other Hebrew Bible texts. By the power of the Spirit, the Bible is a living conversation in which texts talk to each other. Some texts confirm other texts, while others contest them. As reading communities, we are invited to enter the living conversation, to hear the variety of voices in the biblical witness, and to discern through those multiple voices how God is calling us to live faithfully in our times. It is both exciting and challenging to be invited into this conversation.

As we always tell our seminary students, studying the Bible is one of the most risky enterprises they will ever undertake. By entering into the biblical conversations, “sitting with” the biblical conversation partners, and allowing them to inform our conversation, we will be transformed for mission in ways we may not now dream possible. It is risky—and it is our calling as God’s people together in ministry and mission. (See “Lutherans Read the Bible” on p. 12.)

Setting the Stage: Elimelech’s Story (Ruth 1:1–5)
The setting of the story in the days of the judges harkens back to an earlier time in Israel’s history, remem-

ered as an idyllic past when rural life was simpler and neighbors more neighborly. From the opening verse, the Hebrew practice of choosing names descriptive of the location or character named is apparent. Action begins in the Judean town of Bethlehem, a rural village whose name means “house of bread.” The irony around which the beginning of the story pivots is the lack of bread in the house of bread. Because of the famine, a local resident emigrates with his family from Judah to a foreign land where bread can be found. As the story begins, a number of characters are introduced. In each case, the meaning of their names is a significant clue previewing how their individual story lines will develop: Elimelech (“God is king”), Naomi (“pleasant”), Mahlon (“weakness”), Chilion (“sickness”), Orpah (“over the shoulder”), and Ruth (“water of saturation,” “satisfy”).

1. Read aloud Ruth 1:1–5. Especially given the meanings of the names, what strikes you as you read these verses? If you had never read the story before, what do you imagine would follow next?
2. In light of other biblical references to it, the reference to the country of Moab is particularly important. To trace several of these references, complete the chart below. What does the chart reveal about Israel’s attitude toward Moab and Moabites?

Irony abounds in Ruth 1:1–5. Due to lack of bread in the house of bread, a man whose name means “God is king” is forced to emigrate with his family to a despised foreign land filled with worshipers of a different god, to a people with whom contact is forbidden according to the texts cited above. Interestingly, the people of despised Moab welcome the immigrants and are willing to marry their daughters into their family. Nonetheless, disaster continues to follow. Elimelech dies, raising questions about why God the king has allowed such a thing to happen, so far from home. After his death, his sons marry local women. Given the meaning of the sons’ names (“weakness” and “sickness”), it is no surprise that soon they die, too. Left alone in a foreign land with no men to support her and two daughters-in-law who, according to the texts cited above, would be abhorred in her own land, Naomi’s name (“pleasant”) makes less and less sense as a description of her reality.

Naomi Prepares to Return Home: Parting Words to Orpah and Ruth (Ruth 1:6–9)

Possibly only those who have suffered the kind of losses Naomi endured can imagine how lonely and desperate she must have felt as she pondered her options for the future. As a widow whose sons had died, she lacks legal advocates; as a displaced Israelite in a foreign land, she has no male relatives nearby to help her out. No wonder that when she hears that the famine has ended in Judah, she decides to go back to the house of bread.

Reference	Instruction	Response
Numbers 25:1–5		
Deuteronomy 23:3–6		
Ezra 9:1–4		
Nehemiah 13:1–3		

- 3.** Read Ruth 1:6–9. What do these verses reveal about how Naomi feels about her daughters-in-law and what she wishes for them?

Clearly, Naomi does not share the aversion that many other Israelites would have felt toward the Moabites. In encouraging her daughters-in-law to remain in their homeland, she uses language that clues the reader in to two of the “H” words that are key to the unfolding of the story. The first clue is an allusion to the theme of heroic action. Ancient readers would have expected Naomi to send her daughters-in-law back to their fathers’ houses, not their mothers’ houses (1:8). In fact, there are only two other references to “mother’s house” in the entire Hebrew Bible (Genesis 24:28 and Song of Solomon 3:4, 8:2). In all three of these, women are the primary actors. Their actions determine how their stories will unfold. In this light, the reference to “mother’s house” in Ruth 1:8 alludes to women as the primary actors in the unfolding story. Their heroic actions will move their story forward to its conclusion.

The second clue is the first appearance of the word *hesed*, translated in the NRSV as “deal kindly” (1:8). Often used to refer to God’s loyalty and loving kindness to Israel, *hesed* expresses loving loyalty that goes beyond the expected to meet essential needs. Naomi’s prayer that God deal kindly with Orpah and Ruth as they have dealt with her is in stark contrast to the biblical laws forbidding Israelite contact with Moabites. From Naomi’s perspective, God’s loving kindness extends to Moabites as well as to Israelites. It seems that God’s criterion for judgment has much more to do with how people treat each other than with their ethnic identity. (See “On the Journey in Community” on p. 6.)

Naomi Rebuts Her Daughters-in-law

Read Ruth 1:10–13. To understand Naomi’s rebuttal of the younger women’s desire to return with her to

Bethlehem, it is necessary to understand the ancient law to which she alludes. Because the ancient Israelites deemed it essential that a man’s name live on through his sons, extraordinary action was decreed if a man died sonless. This “law of levirate marriage” required the brother of the deceased to have relations with the deceased’s widow (Deuteronomy 25:5–6). The son born of this union would continue the name of the widow’s deceased husband and have legal rights to his property.

According to the levirate law, aged Naomi is stuck between a rock and a hard place. Even if a brother of her husband were available, she is past child-bearing age. Nor did her sons have brothers to carry out the levirate duty with Orpah and Ruth. Naomi’s family line is at an end. There is no future for her and no future with her for her daughters-in-law. It is better that they remain in Moab and remarry among their own people.

- 4.** How does Naomi understand what has happened to her? What do you think of her interpretation?

The Daughters-in-law Respond

As you read Ruth 1:14–18, put yourself in the position of Orpah and Ruth.

- 5.** Compare and contrast the responses of Orpah and Ruth. Who chose the more reasonable approach? Explain.

To journey into the unknown with a bitter mother-in-law or to go back to the comfort of the known with birth family and friends—these are the options open to Orpah and Ruth. Looking back “over her shoulder” as befits her name, Orpah chooses the familiar. (See “Orpah’s Choice” on p. 22.) Since we hear no more of her story, we can only imagine her future in her

homeland. Ruth's choice, eloquently expressed in *hesed* language as loyalty to the point of taking on Naomi's religious identity and being buried far from family and friends, is full of risk. How will Naomi respond to her refusal to follow directions? How will she be received in a land where her people are despised? Lacking answers but risking the journey anyway, Ruth begins the long walk toward the unknown, guided only by an older woman who refuses to speak on the way.

- 6.** *Often Ruth 1:16–17 is chosen as a reading at weddings. Why do you suppose this is so? How is a marriage service similar to and different from what is being recounted in the text?*

Homecoming: Naomi and the Women of the City

Read Ruth 1:19–21. Naomi's destination is clear—the rural village from which she emigrated years earlier. We can only imagine how hot and dusty the long walk home was, how perilous the journey of two unaccompanied women, how curious the stares of onlookers as the silent older woman plods along with an equally silent younger woman in her wake.

Those who live in rural America can easily imagine the curiosity and excitement of the residents of Bethlehem as the two dusty travelers approach. Few outsiders journey through isolated rural outposts like Bethlehem, and those who do can expect to be objects of interest. So it is with Naomi and Ruth—until it dawns on the women of the town that one of the “strangers” is in fact their very own Naomi. Perhaps we can imagine the kinds of questions running through the local women's minds—where are the menfolk and who is this foreign woman dragging along behind—but all we are privileged to hear is their puzzled query, “Is that you, Naomi?”

Naomi's reply gives us great insight into her mental state. The woman whose name means “pleasant” tells the women to call her “bitter” (Mara). Not only that, she goes on to charge God with causing her bitterness.

The Hebrew text of the final clause of verse 21 makes Naomi's point more strongly than it might seem in the NRSV translation. A literal translation of the Hebrew reads: “Yahweh has afflicted me and Shaddai has done evil to me.” *Yahweh* is the name for God translated as “the LORD” throughout the Hebrew Bible. *Shaddai*, usually translated as “the Almighty,” can have connotations of “Nurturer.” The irony in Naomi's words is sharp: Rather than nurturing her spirit in her time of bereavement, God has turned against her and caused her to return home empty of the full family with whom she left. From her perspective, her meaningful life is over; bitterness toward God is all she has left. (See “Tale of Two Widows” on p. 18.)

- 7.** *If you were one of the women of the town, how would you respond to Naomi? Why would you respond in this way?*

Setting the Stage for Action to Follow

Read Ruth 1:22. As much as we might like to know the townswomen's response to Naomi's bitter words, we can only imagine what they may or may not have said. Destitute and without a husband or sons to support her, lacking legal protection and rights, Naomi has returned to the small-town world of Bethlehem. Ruth's immigration into this world is even more perilous. Where will they go? What will they do? How will people respond to the ethnically despised alien in their midst? At this point, we do not know. The one new bit of information we gain is that the barley harvest has just begun. The stage is set for the action to follow.

- 8.** *The plight of Naomi and Ruth echoes down through the centuries in the lives of refugees in every corner of the globe. As you read the newspapers or hear the news this month, make a list of groups of people displaced by war, famine, or ethnic strife. Include your*

ever-expanding list into your daily prayers and, if you feel comfortable doing so, bring it with you to Bible study next month to be included in the opening prayer.

Digging Deeper

9. Which character do you identify with most in the story thus far? What in your life has led you to this identification? How might realizing similarities between that character's life and yours be a resource as you continue to grow in the life abundant that God desires for you?
10. Probably every community includes people whose sometimes understandable bitterness matches that of Naomi's. What are some ways that communities can lovingly include these people without allowing their bitterness to permeate an entire group?

Final Thoughts on Ruth 1

Clearly, God remains hidden in the experiences of the characters in Ruth 1. Mentioned only in Naomi's bitter lament, God has yet to make a visible move. People who have struggled to hold on to faith in times when God remains so hidden as to seem completely absent have particular insight into the depth of Naomi's pain and anger. How can we go on when God seems so incredibly against us or so far removed from us? This is one of the questions the story will address.

The character of Ruth remains somewhat an enigma. Surely she knows how despised her people are in Naomi's homeland. Why is she willing to give up everything she's ever known to follow a mother-in-law who has clearly told her not to do so? What is her love, her loyalty—her *hesed*—all about? These are questions to ponder as the story progresses.

Closing Prayer

God of all people and all places,
we thank you for the opportunity
to gather this day
for worship and study.

Grant us grace to see you hidden
in those deemed outsiders in our world
and there to serve you with gladness.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Looking Ahead

Elimelech's story concludes with his death and the death of his sons, resulting in the end of their seed, their lineage. Naomi and Ruth's journey to Bethlehem concludes with the observation that the harvest of barley seeds is underway. In chapters 2 and 3, these two types of seeds will come together in a totally unexpected way. 🌾

The Rev. Gwen Saylor is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. She is a deaconess in the Valparaiso Lutheran deaconess community and an ELCA pastor. **The Rev. Ann Fritschel** is associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary. She has served churches in Dickinson, Mohall, and Hamerly, N.D. She is the director of the Center for Global Theologies at the seminary.

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WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study

Involvement through your vote

Elections provide critical opportunities to exercise both our civic duty as citizens and our religious duty as Christians to put our faith into action. The Women of the ELCA resource *Called to Be Political (But I Don't Want to Be Political!)* helps us learn more. When used for group study, the program takes about two hours.

Called to Be Political offers a glimpse into the teachings of Martin Luther on the role of Christians in politics and explores how those teachings still speak to us. To download the free resource, visit Women of the ELCA's Web site, www.womenoftheelca.org and click on Programs for Your Women's Group. You may also call Laura Barkenquast at 800-638-3522, ext. 2737 or e-mail her at laura.barkenquast@elca.org.

Faithful Democracy launches Web site

Faithful Democracy has launched a non-partisan Web site designed to educate and engage people of faith about their role in the 2008 electoral process.

FaithfulDemocracy.org is a "safe and welcoming space" for people to discuss the role of faith in the public life and promote civic participation, according to a news release from Faithful Democracy. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is a member of Faithful Democracy—a coalition of 13 national faith-based organizations.

Whole life health program

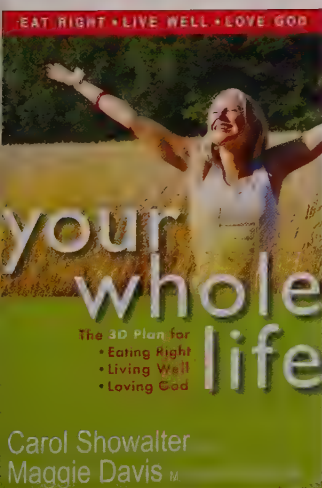
3D is a Christ-centered health program founded in 1972 by Carol Showalter.

The original 3D book, *3D: Diet, Discipline, and Discipleship*, sold more than 500,000 copies. Responding to the continued interest in 3D, now Paraclete Press is publishing a new book that brings the principles of 3D to a new level for 2008. Inspired by the Scripture verse in which Jesus says to a woman, "Your faith has made you whole," the title of this new book is *Your Whole Life: The 3D Plan for Eating Right, Living Well, and Loving God* by Carol Showalter and Maggie Davis, a nutritionist.

The plan is designed to help people balance three different areas of life: health, daily lifestyle, and spiritual growth. To learn more, visit the *Your Whole Life!* Web site at www.3DYourWholeLife.com.

Peace Not Walls

The new DVD, "Peace Not Walls: Making a Difference in the Holy Land," offers an introduction to the work of Peace Not Walls, the ELCA campaign dedicated to peace with justice in Israel-Palestine. The DVD features images from the Holy Land and interviews with ELCA members, Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson, Bishop Munib Younan, and many others. The 28-minute video explores such topics as the ELCA's Middle East peace initiative, the Israeli separation barrier, accompaniment with the Palestinian Lutheran church, and collaboration with interfaith peace partners. You may order a copy for your congregation or institution at no cost by calling or e-mailing Marie (Mia) Cortez at marie.cortez@elca.org or 773-380-2642 (or 800-638-3522, ext. 2642).





Have you ever looked up the definition of *balance*? The dictionary says: 1. Something used to produce equilibrium, counterpoise. 2. Mental steadiness or emotional stability; habit of calm behavior.

When I think of balance, what first comes to mind are those cute little toys my kids liked, Weebles. Remember them? You'd try to push

them over and they'd wobble and sway every which way until finally they would return to their center of balance. Sounds like most of us today: constantly being pushed from this side and that until we're wobbling from exhaustion and worry—and it can be hard to stop wobbling and come back to center.

As a life coach and spiritual companion, I work with many women

who struggle with finding and keeping balance in their lives. They are overcommitted in at least one area of life: Their work is too demanding, they've taken on too many volunteer activities, or their family responsibilities consume them. The overload leaves them feeling stressed, unfulfilled, or depressed.

Women have the God-given gift of nurture. We love to take care of

ALANCING act

by Deborah Leoni-Willhite

a member of our family, community, and congregation—all the people we serve. And we are among those pieces. As we take care of others, we must take care of ourselves as well.

Jesus knew that. There are many stories in the Bible about people who wanted him to heal them. He was constantly being pushed and pulled to nurture and heal; however, he knew he had to walk away at times and pray. He knew that he must go out into the wilderness to regroup, to refuel, so that he could go back to the crowds and continue teaching, preaching, and healing.

The apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 1:3–5, spoke to the issue of balance and give and take: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. For just as the sufferings of Christ are

abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.” In other words, in order to console, we too must be consoled.

Taking time to nurture ourselves is not selfishness. It’s actually selfless if we consider that we can give our best service when we are balanced, centered, and energized.

In order to create that balance and centeredness in our lives, we must go into the wilderness as Jesus did—to give ourselves a retreat experience, a time set apart to focus, to ask, to listen, to pray, and to respond to God’s call. It’s our responsibility as Christians. We need not go to an actual desert place. Any place where we can be alone, undistracted, and quiet is the place to rediscover balance. Lent is a traditional time for these wilderness experiences; however, we can find these quiet places on a regular basis, even for 10 minutes every day.

A matter of perspective

The first step to creating balance

others, to tend to the sick, to help the elderly, to nurse our young—it’s a blessed gift we have been given. However, it can be easy to forget that in order to truly serve as Christ modeled in his own servant-hood, we too must be nurtured.

Pieces of the puzzle

Think of a jigsaw puzzle. Each of those interlocking pieces represents

in our lives is to become aware of the choices we make that leave us feeling unsatisfied. Change is not possible if we are not conscious of our behavior. Too often we fall prey to feeling that we are victims of the circumstances and situations in our lives. I continually challenge my clients to shift to the perspective that we *always* have choices. No matter what the circumstance, we have options. Maybe we can't change the particular circumstance, but we can change our perspective about it, and that can bring peace. We can choose how to view a situation—as a problem or an opportunity. We can choose how to react to it.

You might wonder, “How can I change my perspective?” It takes practice and a commitment. Shifting your perspective is a matter of identifying your thoughts and feelings. You ask yourself: What thought patterns are hindering me? What feelings are causing me stress?

Then ask: What thoughts and feelings can I adopt that will lead

to a new and better outcome? Our thoughts and feelings are *choices*, and that's good news because we can change them.

A clear picture


For some people “the balancing act” means learning to say no. For others it means learning to say yes. Which is it for you? I've had to learn to say no. That choice makes me better able to respond to God's will for me. If I choose to say no when I'm asked to take on another task at church, at work, or with my family, I'm declaring to myself, to God, and to the world that I can't do it all.

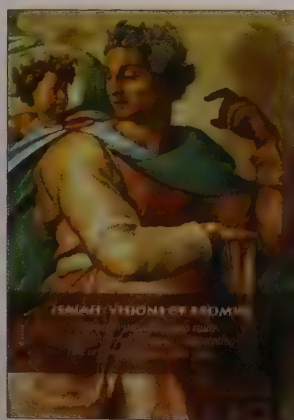
Saying no allows me to set healthy limits that bring a sense of calm and freedom. I know that I don't have to continue to “play God” by trying to be superwoman. And, by setting boundaries, I've gained respect for myself and in all my relationships.

Making too many commitments is not God's will for us. That's our

ego getting in the way, thinking we have to do it all.

I encourage you to envision what your life would look like if you were living in balance. Until you can get a clear picture of that, it will not happen. What area of your life needs more attention? What area might need less attention? Your career? Your home and environment? Your family and friends? Fun and recreation? Finances? Primary relationship? Spirituality and prayer? Health and wellness? Take some time to assess which of these areas are the least satisfying for you. Look at what you might need to give up to create more balance in your life. What action might you need to take on? What would it take to create and maintain balance in each of these areas?

Most importantly, ask God to give you what you need to step into that grander version of who you were created to be. Ask God to show you what you need to give up and let go of so that you serve from a place of centeredness and calm, as Jesus modeled for us. Make a commitment to yourself and to God to take the actions that are necessary for you to stop “weeble wobbling.” You will see how much more effectively you can serve those you love because you will be nourished.  **Deborah Leoni-Willhite** is a personal trainer, life coach, and spiritual companion. Her Web site is www.insightout-lifecoaching.com.



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SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

by Terri Lackey

OCTOGENARIAN FINISHES WHAT SHE STARTED AT 18

Lola Ide might take a bit longer than most students to walk to class. But once she gets in her seat, she's as quick as any of them.

"I walk with a cane, so I'm not very fast," said the 84-year-old student at Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, Kansas. "But when I get in class, I feel as smart as anybody. Most students are young people who've learned a lot through books. I've learned through experience."

Ide says she makes mostly A's in her college classes. Her only C was in lifetime fitness: a gym class.

Thanks to your gracious contributions, Women of the ELCA awarded 24 women ages 25 to 84 a total of \$23,450 through seven scholarship categories.

Ide, secretary of the Women of the ELCA group at her church, St. John Lutheran, Pittsburg, won a 2008 Cronk Opportunity Scholarship for Laywomen to help with her undergraduate work in general studies and psychology. She's not sure when she'll graduate; she just wants to finish what she start-

ed when she was 18. Ide entered college in 1941 but dropped out when she fell in love and married a Lutheran seminarian. She had four children with her first husband of 16 years. After he died, she married a widower, also a Lutheran pastor, with four children. Together they had one child.

At Pittsburg State since 2006, Ide is "one of the more interesting students" English professor Paul J. Morris II has had in some time.

"Though she may refer to herself as an old lady, I would consider her the youngest spirit I've had the pleasure to teach since I began teaching at PSU 10 years ago," he wrote in a recommendation letter.

Another lifelong learner, Karen Younger, 51, was awarded the 2007 Schmieder Academic Leadership Scholarship which helps senior faculty or staff at ELCA colleges and seminaries with summer courses in leadership.

Before taking a sabbatical from her job as a professor of nursing at Augustana College, Sioux



Lola Ide

Falls, South Dakota, Younger "had a growing sense of urgency, tension, and anxiety about the future direction of my life. Had I used my life and gifts wisely and to God's purpose?"

Turns out, she had. "And so my sabbatical began, with God's help . . . to bring my soul to rest."

In her coursework at the HERS Management Institute at the University of Denver, Younger was required to identify her passions

Photo by Amber Bernard

through a values-based inventory evaluation. There she discovered what she always knew in her heart: She loves to learn and she enjoys sharing her knowledge with students. "My husband would always ask me, 'How can it take that much time to prepare for a two-hour class?'" Now she understands that she's not just preparing for class, she's "learning something new, significant, and meaningful" to take to her students.

Women of the ELCA scholarships support a diverse group of women, including second-career students, seminarians, female college faculty, and professional women on the road to career advancement. Various fields of study are represented, such as lay ministry, ordination, child development, social work, health sciences, and teaching. Some scholarship recipients are undergraduates; others are in their final year of seminary. Some graduated high school 10 or more years ago and are just now beginning their higher education.

Women selected for scholarships are age 21 or over and represent every region in the ELCA, according to Emily Hansen, associate for programs, Women of the ELCA. Many live and work in extraordinary circumstances as they pursue their educational and career goals. 🌿

Terri Lackey is managing editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*.

2008-2009 SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

Ordained Ministry Scholarship supported by the Chilstrom Fund

Assists women who are second-career students at ELCA seminaries preparing for ordained ministry in ELCA congregations

- ▶ Michon Weingartner, 4B
St. Paul's Lutheran
Wichita, Kan.
- ▶ Beth Woodard, 9B
First Lutheran Church
Greensboro, N.C.

Academic Leadership Scholarship supported by the Schmieder Fund

Assists in the development of senior women faculty or staff leadership at ELCA colleges and seminaries in the United States by attending a summer leadership institute

- ▶ Lynn C. Nakamura, 6B
Professor of Old Testament
at Trinity Lutheran Seminary
Columbus, Ohio

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarship supported by the Drinkhall Franke/Seeley Knudstrup Scholarship Fund

Assists mature ELCA laywomen preparing for an occupation in Christian service through a graduate course of study

- ▶ Sarah Herman, 6F
Peace Lutheran
Gahanna, Ohio

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarship supported by the Amelia Kemp Fund

Assists mature ELCA women of color in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational courses of study

- ▶ Tempie Beaman, 2B
Ascension Lutheran
Los Angeles, Calif.

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarship supported by Belmer Fund and Flora Prince Memorial Fund

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- ▶ Nikole Allen, 1E
Trinity Lutheran
Dallas, Ore.

FUND AND SYNODICAL REGION

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Lutheran Memorial
Omaha, Neb.

▶ Lola Ide, 4B
St. John Lutheran
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▶ Patricia Jensen, 4A
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▶ Rebecca Kerr, 9D
Holy Cross Lutheran
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▶ Cindy Larson, 5A
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▶ Mary Christine Lohr, 7A
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▶ Rachel Robinson, 9B
Holy Trinity Lutheran
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▶ Sarah Schuurman, 5A
Augustana Lutheran
Chicago, Ill.

▶ Brandy Walters, 9A
Grace Lutheran
Fredericksburg, Va.

▶ Nancy Walter, 6C
Holy Shepherd
St. John, Ind.

▶ Cheryl Whitchurch, 3F
Zion Lutheran
Litchfield, Minn.

▶ Shelby Wyland, 8F
Bethany Lutheran
Montoursville, Pa.

Laywomen Opportunity Scholarships supported by Cronk, First Triennium Board, General, Mehring, Paepke, Piero/Wade, and Edwin/Edna Robeck Funds

Assists ELCA laywomen in undergraduate, graduate, professional, or vocational studies

- ▶ Carmen Colon-Brown, 6F
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- ▶ Tracy Creech, 9C
Mt. Calvary Lutheran
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GRACE NOTES

Community of Women

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



To learn more about individual partners or to make one of your loved ones an individual partner, call 800-638-3522, ext. 2730 today.

What is the best part

about participating in Women of the ELCA? We asked that question of more than 2,000 participants in a survey last fall. The top answer was the friendship and support of the women in the congregational unit. (Bible study was second, and the opportunity to care for others was third.)

Are you surprised by that? I'm not. Women throughout the country have shared stories with me about the friendships that develop and are nurtured through the women's organization. I hear stories of friends walking together through illness, divorce, death, job loss, and more. Women talk of praying together and mentoring each other in faith. And, of course, we hear stories of friends celebrating births, graduations, new jobs, and other milestones together.

That same research study showed that 70 percent of our participants are 65 or older. What does the future hold for our organization? You and I who are active in Women of the ELCA have experienced a strong community of women who walk together on their faith journeys. We want our daughters, nieces, granddaughters, and younger friends to enjoy this kind of support as well.

Now it is possible for you to give that gift of community to the women you love by making them an individual partner in Women of the ELCA. By making a younger woman—whether she be 50 or 35 or even 20—an individual partner, you can help grow and invest in this organization that we all cherish. An indi-

vidual partner will receive a subscription to *Lutheran Woman Today* and *Café*, our on-line magazine for younger women, and a bi-annual electronic newsletter. The cost is \$20 per year.

Who might become an individual partner? We envision at least three categories of women as prime candidates. Women who are in churches without a congregational unit of Women of the ELCA could participate in our programs, use our resources (including the *LWT* Bible studies), and contribute financially to our organization, all in a way that works for them. We currently have Women of the ELCA units in slightly more than 7,000 congregations, so that leaves more than 3,000 congregations and their women without access to our organization.

Women who are in a church with a congregational unit might also become individual partners. For any number of reasons, women might not take part in the congregational unit. By becoming individual partners, they connect with the larger organization. Once they get to know us, they may be moved to participate in the congregational unit.

The third group of women are those who do not have a strong connection to a congregation, for whatever reason. Articles and other resources in the gift package, supported by the gentle love of a grandmother, mother, or aunt, might be conversation openers for those young women, an invitation into the community of faith. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Anchors for Life

by Catherine Malotky

A web of relationships

bears me up. They are anchors for my silk strands, holding me between them like lifelines. They teach me who I am, how I fit in the world, and where I can turn when my web wears and tears. They reach back in time. They are my ancestors and their neighbors. They come to me through stories—love stories, adventure stories, stories that pique my curiosity, and even stories I'd rather not hear or claim. But they are the stories of my life.

One of those stories is about an ancestor of mine. My great-grandfather and his sister left a less-than-nurturing stepmother, their own mother having gone to an early grave. The two young people boarded a boat hoping that a new land might offer them an opportunity to establish their own families.

Once they settled here, I've heard, my great-grandfather was a dealer in horses—but no one knew whether he stole them or sold them. This story, with no county records, might have stood. We would have wondered, and I would have thought that my affection for all things equine was at least a little genetic.

Now I know (or think I do) that he was neither thief nor trader. He was a good judge of horses, so good that his neighbors asked him to come along when they were buying. He was a consultant—a good neighbor who even dressed for these occasions. Great-grandfather Albert wore his dignified Prince Albert topcoat to dispense his wisdom. Or so the story goes.

Even if memory has the details wrong, I still cherish the story. It was told to me when I pined for a horse as a girl. It gives me a link to my family, a place to anchor so I might understand myself a little better.

The story of Ruth, a young woman removed from me by a hundred generations more, is part of my web as well. Her story, preserved by its telling, is an anchor. How many young girls heard the story of Ruth from their mothers before it was ever written down? How has it changed over the millennia? I cannot know, but I still claim it because it has shaped me. It helps me understand who I am in the world.

I still grieve with Naomi as she mourns her losses. I still marvel at Ruth's courage as she leaves her home. I still laugh at their plotting and rejoice at their turn of fortune. I still cling to the link between them, and learn about loyalty and bitterness, hope and resilience. I still learn how to live. The story is true because it bears the truth about life and love and mercy.

God, in these holy stories, you unfold yourself and your way to us. I am grateful that so many have gone before me on the path of righteousness that I might learn your mercy in the stories of their lives. Open my eyes to your mercy in my life's unfolding. In Jesus' name. Amen. 🌿

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



Quilters pictured, (left to right): Benita Flora, Karen Sumner, Chris Berenz, Joan Alters, Judy Jensen, Barbara Cayton, Kathy Ellis, Carol Viegut, Lori McCluskey, Judy Voigt, Lydia Rachu, Kathy Peterson, Jan Erickson, Pam Engelmeier, Caryl Marone, Pat Seivert, Cindy Petzke

Members of First English Lutheran Church of Wauau, Wisconsin, spent a Saturday in April volunteering on community service projects. The congregation cleaned up highways and yards, made picnic tables, cooked supper for the community, and staffed the Neighbor's Place, a community center that helps families who need furnishings, clothing, and food. The

Women of the ELCA group, which regularly donates quilts to Lutheran World Relief, made 20 quilts that day to donate to The Neighbor's Place. The quilts will be saved for "special purposes," such as families who suffer disasters like a house fire, the director said.

—Submitted by Toni Sanford

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